What's Judy Got to Do with It?

(Trademark, Tina Turner)

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The night is bitter, the stars have lost their glitter. The Winds grow colder.
Suddenly you're older…

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PREFACE

A critique that specifically stuck with me, after my final jury for my bachelor's thesis. Where I presented the video installation: *La Fée des Oiseaux - "Lá, lá vois mon petit: le temps se fait espace."* Was that the teachers would have liked to see "this world", aptly named: *The Saint Triverius Psychiatric Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland* (a corner dimension, but more on that later) and all of its varying forms, whether they be fairytale-like, surreal or horror inspired come out of my own home/chamber/workplace/reality. As a guidance tool for the audience to see that everything in my work is of my own creation and is (almost) always shot in my own house, covered in green screen or not. In other words a visual metaphor for the duality of the simplicity of my workspace or shooting locations and the grandeur and otherworldliness it eventually evokes. Also because this is, again in relation to the audience, a simple way of clearly communicating this transportation to another world.

But upon numerous reviews of that critique I realised that I already made a video that does exactly touch upon that concept. Its the video I made for the installation of my re-examination in September. Which is why I took the practice courses again this year, but luckily got my diploma this time. But the video I am talking about, called: *Einsam - Damsel*. Was supposed to function as a self-portrait of me in a delirious state, in reference to the many paintings that were made after Wagnerian tableaus. Performing to a recording of *Wagner's* "*Einsam in trüben tagen*" also known as '*Elsa's Dream*' from *Lohengrin*. I'm mentioning that second title, as it is the character *Elsa* that I based my characterisation for the video of off. In the opera *The Dukedom of Brabant* is in disarray as the young heir, *Elsa's* little brother *Gottfried*, has mysteriously vanished. But *Elsa* is also the main suspect, despite her innocence, she is unable to prove it as she drifts off into dreamlike states, like she does in the aforementioned aria. While being publicly asked to testify.

She recounts that she has dreamt of a mysterious knight, chaste and pious, who will come down by divine intervention and save the heir and take her as his bride. To everyones surprise her prayers are answered and the *Grailknight Lohengrin* appears, on a boat drawn by a swan. However she is not allowed to ask for his name or origin. When she breaks this promise, brought on by doubt exploited by the conniving *Ortrud*. He must bid his farewell but not before saving *Gottfried*. Who, turns out was turned into the swan that drew his boat by a spell conjured by *Ortrud*, who reveals she practices pagan witchcraft. The story tells the struggle and unattainability of divine love in comparison to human love, as the former requires complete devotion which is realistically not a human characteristic. Its because of that theme that I chose to use the opera's music as the main score for my video. As excerpts from *Camille Saint-Saëns's Samson et Dalilah* and *George Bizet's Carmen* also appear throughout the video. It showed me in my virtually empty apartment (as we had just moved in there) with the character of *Elsa* projected onto me falling in and out of dreamlike states. Using the empty walls as backdrops to transition into shots of cloudy skies, flowers and treetops that reappear through my front window. Recounting prayers and dreams of a knight in shining armour, that in my case never appears as he had already left.

By now I can understand why the work was subject to criticism. Although it being a lovely sentiment, it remained on that personal level throughout the whole video. Which does not reach out to anybody in the audience but myself. And unless the content doesn't attempt to reach out to its audience outside of that personal sentiment, in a course that does critique the concept over the execution first, that does not suffice. Besides that however I do still think that it was a successful video, aesthetically speaking that is. Despite my utter lack of space, material and tools. The costume, cinematography, choreography and performance were successful in my personal opinion.
It did however teach me the importance of how to tread around work that deals with personal feelings and with what material, that adheres to my own style and aesthetics, to embed it with. So it can become something that does reach beyond my personal experience and becomes recognisable for the audience to relate to it.

THE BEDROOM QUEEN

But there still remains an issue. That I'm not sure if I want to present my universe in this way. The artist presenting their workspace as the birthplace of their microcosm, which then often takes the form of the mental space. Feels like a trope at this point. It also reminds me too much of a specific term that originated among queer people on the internet in recent years. Being a "*Bedroom Queen*". Which refers to a drag artist that either got their start as doing, or still does drag in their own home. This is often because of the fact that this artist is from a very small town that has little to none public queer safe spaces or the artist is still too young to perform in clubs or bars. The latter reason relates specifically to American drag culture however because of the legal drinking age there being 21 and above, which restricts entertainers that are below that age to be able to perform. And although I myself don't see this team as derogatory. It is often used amongst queens to discredit other's expertise in the profession. As a great part of drag culture is centred around community and public recognition. But I find it hypocritical to look upon the term as something negative. It touches upon another very important pillar of queer the community, being: safety and agency. Which are rights that people are actively trying to take away from us. An individual can find their voice from the safety of their own home as it shields you from an outside world that doesn't deem you worthy of celebrating that. The reason that the term uses the specific word 'bedroom' signifies that people use that specific space as it can protect them from their own family members that might not understand or disapprove of what they're doing. But the reason I'm actually bringing it up is because I want to distance myself from the term. In the sense that I would describe myself and have been described by other drag artists as a bedroom queen. But my issue with that lies in the fact that I don't necessarily see myself as being a drag queen. I am an artist that performs in drag. Which might come over as very confusing but I would think it comes down to the way someone channels and engages with the format. My end goal in these projects is not to present myself as a woman or another gender identity. Or to directly engage with the nightlife culture.

But I rather question the format itself and use it's references to tell stories that reaches beyond that world. And in projecting these characters onto me doesn't feel like embodying a different persona in my experience, but rather becoming whole by channeling a feminine energy that is already inherent to my being. To draw an example; in the *Einsam* video, I don't see it as me performing as *Elsa*, or my drag persona in an *Elsa* costume. I see it as me through the narrative lens of that character. This is why I called the work a self portrait, because it was still a depiction of me, but filtered through an operatic aria.

Now this is not said to discredit the work of other drag artists or actual drag queens. But it is not in my specific interest to "*do a number*" in clubs or bars (anymore). And this also doesn't mean that a performance can't carry a heartfelt sentiment or important political statement. But speaking from my own experience, the general "*drag number*" is performed with the aim to get: attention, compliments, a booking fee and your free drink tickets (and maybe also some traction on social media). But in my case, the drag is not the even main event of my work, it is simply a part of how its carried out. I just might say that it comes across that way, but that is because people are surprised that I'm actually quite good at it.

CROSSOVER LEGACY PARODY

With all this being said doesn't mean that I just want to completely abandon the concept. After all it was a recommended option during a crucial moment of receiving critiques on my work. In assessing that the format has become a trope. Especially in media concerning more alternative performers like drag artists. After all it is a strong concept. As it does challenge the artist to completely transform their working or any of their domestic spaces into another world. It is very in line with *Cindy Sherman* or the photographic works of *Claude Cahun*. Which both channel (complete) transformation, denying any sort of strict realism as the key lies in the usage of clichés and elements from popular culture as points of reference for the audience. Which then allows this transformation of this space to have a sense of whimsy and self awareness.

It is now a point of interest that the contours of the room covered draped fabric with a random assembly of various objects as decoration is still recognisable. But the works of *Cindy Sherman* and *Claude Cahun* are formats of there own at this point. But all this brought me to the idea to make a parody of the concept as a whole.

The reason that I'm not interested in using this narrative in a literal sense, besides the fact that I want to point out a difference in my implementing of drag to that of the general perception of what it supposedly is. Is because of this world itself. *The Saint Triverius Psychiatric Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland*, is supposed to be seen as malicious in nature. Not that it necessarily wants to be, but it is after all a manifestation of negative energy. The issue is that this world, which can be best described as a fictional parallel universe, is not just something that can just come out of a domestic space, or be represented as such. It's main inspiration consists after all of horror media and the works of the late *David Lynch*. But mostly because its entire intention revolves around the idea of simulacra; the copy of something of an unknown origin. So it cannot be represented through something that is still recognisable as a home or workspace (which are the same in my case). As that would entirely defeat it's own purpose. But further explanation on this topic deserves an entire chapter of its own.

But like previously mentioned, there is actually a way to work with the aforementioned format, in a way that it can still comply with it's actual intention. That is if it were to be presented as a deliberate copy of the former, like a parody, establishing that this story telling device is a trope. This also doesn't negate the concept of the simulacra. In this way of using the narrative, the parallel universe only resembles to copy the cliché instead of having to become it. Through the parody the parallel universe is actually able to be read more clearly by the audience. To take the concept further I also want to implement parodies on popular themes from drag shows and media that has inspired their own culture. Again to let the audience assess their interpretation of drag and equate it to mine. But also because this vibrant culture has become a perfect example of the simulacra and retroactive mythology.

Many drag queens have dedicated their entire careers around eternalising the legacies of popular female artists. As diva worship is a great part of gay and queer culture.

DIVAS LIVE!

An interesting crossover occurs here with the main inspiration of my practice. Being: opera. Or more so a natural evolution whose clothes line needs tidying up to notice the common thread. Like explained in my previous essay: *From Grétry to Massenet, to Respighi, back to Mozart* and explored upon in my work *La Fée des Oiseaux (...)*. I used *Maria Callas* as the example of an *Opera Diva*, who in poetising the history of opera itself, turned her name and image into the quintessential model of what a *Diva* makes. This is mostly thanks to her dedicated gay fans. That could relate to both her tragic personal life as well as how she channeled her femininity to reach the top of the opera world and redefine it's standards. Even though the term long predates her, it became synonymous to her career. Through the transition of opera into modern musical theatre, thanks to the popularisation of the operetta in the late 19th century. A shorter more comedically charged musical drama, that in the early 20th century also became heavily influenced by cabaret and vaudeville acts. The Diva worship also crossed over into the world of musical theatre, as those female stars also gained a different form of public representation. Examples of the earliest divas from that world are *Lillian Russel* and *Ethel Merman*. Whose carriers both predate *Maria Callas's* by multiple decades might I add. Which only proves my point of her equivalence to the word. But what I'm touching upon is how these female stars from the musical theatre world, that now dominated general entertainment more than opera and classical music, also revolutionised the term. Due to the rise of mass media these entertainers now gained much more public traction, for better or for worse. As they made tv appearances and got parts in the Hollywood studio adaptations of the musicals of which they originated the roles. But also there public lives were laid bare by gossip tabloids. That often even worked in cahoots with production companies to generate more media attention. Examples of female stars like these are: *Gertrude Lawrence, Florence Mills, Judy Garland* and *Barbra Streisand*

As they are seen as the blueprints and made the groundwork of what is considered to be the modern day pop star. But what is important about their inclusion to the discussion that this mass media traction of these entertainers introduced the concept of the para-social relationship with fans, which was also heavily influenced by the early Hollywood studio star system. As that industry played the groundwork for the industry plant, which is what all their actors were essentially.

Judy Garland is the perfect example of the musical movie star of whom the media blurred the lines between her on-screen tragedies and the adversities she faced in her personal life. Many of her issues that were also brought on by the industry that shaped her into the icon that she became. But is because of this reason and of course also her public advocacy for the community that she has become a gay icon. With her discography having become a staple of the drag number repertoire.
I do think that there is something to be said about the fact that so many of these stars became gay icons in relation with the para-social relationships and their media portrayal. Besides the obvious but superficial observation of: glamour, grandeur and femininity. As this also applies to personalities from outside the musical theatre world, like movie and television actors, singers, musicians and so on. As press mediated stories about these celebrities to bring them down and shame them in front of the general more traditional public for their outlandish or even scandalous behaviour. I would argue that queer people in turn would celebrate them for being different and simply being who they were, but also recognising the perseverance that it takes to staying true to such a promise to yourself. They honoured those that were able to come out on top of all the commotion, which was in part thanks to their support. And commemorated those that succumbed to it, like say, *Judy Garland*. Queer people can recognise and relate to the struggle of surviving despite being outnumbered by those who have it out for them. As many of their identities are threatened in their day to day life. Which is becoming more clear and apparent everyday. That despite the progress that has been made. In terms of recognition and and medical support and scientific progress.

Yet there are more than enough people in power that would rather have to be erased in order for them to not face their own realities and fears. Backed by their cherry-picked religious arguments and traditionalistic values as a zeal to their hatred.

LOBOTOMY WARD

As mentioned earlier. An explanation of this other world that I am constantly talking about that appears in my work. *The Saint Triverius Psychiatric Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland*, needs its dedicated segment of explanation. Primarily to explain as to why the trope of the "personal microcosm of the artist comes out of the domestic space" doesn't comply with the concept that my world is trying to portray. So, here goes:

Somewhere around the summer of 2024 I came up with a concept that would eventually evolve into the: "*Welcome to the Saint Triverius Psychiatric Hospital in Bethesda Maryland!*" Cinematic universe. The intention was to make movie in collaboration with my best friend and classmate *Siebe Kool*, that would cross over our personal media and references based around common interests and themes from our personal practice. An important reference and starting point is the *Silent Hill* video game franchise. It's aesthetic serve as main inspiration throughout Siebe's practice. But I specifically saw a gateway that could serve as material to surface the more darker and unheimliche aspects of my personal practice. Even though I am very generally more attracted to frivolous, lush, ethereal and fairy tale-like aesthetics and themes, they also have their dark origins (especially the fairy tales) and do at many times deal with the abject. Either as a way to deal and relativise the fear and uncertainty that it sparks or to euphemize its harsh truth that lies beneath the surface. Its inspiration also allowed me to start creating with new materials to introduce genuine horrific aesthetics to my work. *Silent Hill* is a psychological horror survival game franchise created by *Team Silent* from the Japanese video game developing and publishing company *Konami*. Its first instalment was released in 1999. Up until 2004 the original mainline games were developed, which prompted three sequels to the first game : *Silent Hill 2*, *Silent Hill 3* and *Silent Hill 4: The Room*.

Although out of these four instalments only *Silent Hill* and *Silent Hill 3* are direct followup stories. *Silent Hill 4: The Room* is the first instalment that doesn't take place in the titular town and marked the end of *Team Silent's* involvement with the franchise. Subsequent spinoff sequels were developed by western partners. The three first instalments take place in the fictional town *Silent Hill* in Maine, U.S.A. That is plagued by perpetual supernatural events, cult members that practice the occult and and overall unnerving atmosphere. But most importantly the town is at a crossroads with a parallel dimensions where dreams and feelings like guilt, depression and fear can materialise into nightmares. Or is the shadow reflection of the town a manifestation of those feelings themselves? The most influential and my personal favourite instalment of the franchise is *Silent Hill 2*. It is in this game that the horror genre is implemented in the best way to tell a genuinely tragic story in which its metaphors are more effective. The original games where heavily inspired by the surreal world of *David Lynch*, specifically his involvement with the tv show *Twin Peaks* and his overall use of the Americana aesthetic. *David Lynch* is also a great inspiration to my own practice. In *Twin Peaks* there is a similar story telling device as to the one found in *Silent Hill*. *The Black Lodge*, with the iconic red velvet curtain wall and black and white chevron floor. In universe the name comes from a supposed native American legend. Where *the Black Lodge* serves as the counterpart or shadow version of the *White Lodge*, an alternate dimension of pure goodness. Our natural laws of space and time do not seem to function in the *Black Lodge* and besides its regular inhabitants like *BOB* and *The Arm* it creates evil or unnatural copies of real life people. In typical *David Lynch* style, nothing is really revealed what it's all supposed to mean or signify. But that is fitting for it being media from the post modern era, where the spectator is expected to project their personal meaning upon the work instead of it being gate kept by a supposed highbrow concept that can only be deciphered with the right knowledge or status. But in this specific treatment of the subject it actually allows itself to be multiplied and reinterpreted in new media. Which actually creates a perpetual loop of itself. Just like *the Black Lodge* makes attempted copies of real world elements, however they act strange or operate differently as *the Black Lodge* itself doesn't know what it is making a copy of.

Other artists copy the format of *the Black Lodge* with new iterations, without actually knowing what the original source is meant to represent. But either way, *the Black Lodge* and its subsequent copies like *the Otherworld* from *Silent Hill* or *the Backrooms* from internet creepypasta and its recent box office movie release, all represent the simulacra while being a result of it at the same time.

Which brings me to my personal interest in creating a world or universe that represents the same concept and operates the same way. But with its own invented backstory, purpose and other lore. But nonetheless, my work greatly revolves around the issues of the contemporary art world surrounding the idea of originality and innovation. I'm a firm believer of the "*originality is dead*" part of the discourse, in the sense that apart from technological advancements, nothing truly authentic can be produced anymore. Even if it were due to new technology; that, as its sole reasoning of innovation, falls flat pretty quickly. Because it's still just another form of visual art. Its expectations aren't able to be truly revolutionised anymore, which is a result from the *minimalist* and *conceptual art* movements from the late 60's and early 70's were an artwork could also just be literally nothing besides from the artist exclaiming that it was. This doesn't mean that *post-modernity* or *post-post-modernity* (I guess) is at a complete loss in making art that is still interesting and encourages us to keep questioning. But it is related to *Jan Vercruysse's* definition of the "*memorative image*". In accepting that every image is a result of references or elements that preceed its creation, one should accept that every image made follows this same principle that one can use to their advantage.